

NEWS AND INFORMATION UPDATE FROM THE NATIONAL SKILL STANDARDS BOARD

A Message from James R. Houghton, NSSB Chairman
Retired Chairman and CEO, Corning Incorporated

WHY DO WE NEED NATIONAL SKILL STANDARDS?

Last year, when the new, 27-member National Skills Standards Board elected me chairman, I had to ask myself a blunt question: What is the value of having a national system of voluntary skill standards? I knew if I couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer of my own, I certainly wouldn't do much good for the Board I was to lead.

As we launch this first issue of *NSSB WorkWise* – an effort to begin expanding the information exchange among people across the country who share the Board's interests – I want to tell you why I believe the work that you and we are engaged in holds such importance for our country's future.

My conclusion is no surprise. Skill standards are a national imperative.

I started by considering my own 145-year-old glass manufacturing firm, Corning Incorporated, and how radically new technologies and international competition are changing both the work and the processes involved in glass production. With the partnership of our unions and their leaders, we are striving for agility by constantly updating our equipment, learning new techniques, training our employees, and adjusting work roles. Individual workers now have substantial autonomy to solve problems, make decisions, and monitor quality, working in teams that manage all facets of production.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES
AND INTERNATIONAL
COMPETITION ARE
CHANGING THE
NATURE OF WORK
AND HOW IT IS
ORGANIZED.

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THE BOARD'S MISSION

The National Skill Standards Board encourages the creation and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards which will enhance the ability of the United States to compete effectively in a global economy. These skill standards will be developed by industry in full partnership with education, labor, and community stakeholders, and will be flexible, portable, and continuously updated and approved.

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NSSB CALENDAR

Recent Public Hearings

Wednesday, June 26 -- San Francisco, Calif.; Ramada Plaza Hotel, Fisherman's Wharf, 590 Bay St.

Tuesday, July 9 -- Detroit, Mich.; Westin Hotel, Renaissance Center

Thursday, July 11 -- Washington, D.C.; Holiday Inn on the Hill, 415 New Jersey Ave. N.W.

If you would like to present comments at future hearings, contact: NSSB Hearings Coordinator, (202) 254-8628; fax (202) 254-8646.

NSSB Board Meetings

Friday, July 19 -- Washington, D.C., **Madison Hotel**, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Friday, Nov. 19 - Washington, D.C.; **Location to be determined**, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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WHY WE NEED SKILL STANDARDS



Houghton

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These have been dramatic changes for all of us at Corning. But they really are just reflections of what's happening all over.

The fact is, the American economy is undergoing the most profound transformation since the Industrial Revolution. Capital, production, and markets are now global; jobs are being eliminated by technology and corporate restructuring; and U.S. businesses of all kinds are feeling the pressure of world competition. These powerful forces are changing the nature of work and reshaping the workforce irrevocably.

In human terms, we see the effects in downsizing and worker dislocation, growing anxiety and uncertainty about the future, and a widening income gap between the most and least skilled American workers.

We could just sit on our hands as a society and "let nature take its course." But there is a sense – justified, in my view – that a failure to ad-

dress the workforce implications of today's extraordinary economic changes will jeopardize our future. And sitting still is not usually what we Americans do when we face a crisis. We are more likely to go to work

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to identify the problems, figure out solutions, and make them happen.

What's desperately needed is a new framework for discussion and action that we can all hold in common – whether we are employers, workers, educators, students, or beginning job seekers. This is where a national system of voluntary skill standards comes in. That is the new framework we need to bring people together, help Americans deal with

today's difficult economic changes, and prepare to make the future ours.

Just as they already do in many lines of work, skill standards for the broad spectrum of U.S. jobs will create a roadmap – a common language, if you prefer – that Americans can use to understand and meet changing workplace requirements and assure greater employability.

The mission of the Board – developing a national framework to support skill standards and helping others create the standards – must be accomplished from the grassroots upward, not from the top down. Success will be achieved only if employers, employees, educators, and communities across America want it to be. Their voluntary partnerships to forge skill standards will give the standards life, and their commitment to apply the standards in hiring and training will nourish them.

The National Skill Standards Board has been asked to play a leadership role in this effort and we welcome the opportunity. Join us. Together, we can make an invaluable contribution to a better American future.

BOARD WILL BUILD ON EXISTING EFFORTS

Pioneering workforce-development activities by states, school-to-work programs, and industry-led coalitions are the building blocks for a national system of skill standards, members of the National Skill Standards Board agreed at their May 31 meeting.

Discussing its plans for the next two years, the Board committed itself to work closely with the states and to seek broad public review of NSSB policies and products throughout the development process. Other partners include employers, employees, trade associations, labor, local officials, educators, and community organizations.

"It's an ambitious agenda, but the Board recognizes that the

tremendous diversity of efforts already underway means we are not starting from ground zero," said NSSB Executive Director Judy Gray. "To maximize their efforts and ours, we need the wisdom and guidance of the people already out there." Board activities will include:

► **Identifying "clusters" of similar jobs or skills.** Working with its partners, the Board will identify types of jobs across employment sectors that require similar skills.

► **Defining roles and responsibilities for voluntary partnerships.** The voluntary standards development process at the core of the NSSB mission is employer-led, in collaboration with key partners. The Board will provide guidance to

these grassroots partnerships to assure the portability of the standards they develop, but will not issue its own skill standards.

► **Establishing criteria for endorsement.** The Board will devise the criteria that standards must meet to receive an NSSB endorsement.

► **Broadening public awareness of the benefits of skill standards.** The strategic plan cites a variety of outreach efforts, including hearings to discuss issues and receive public comment, informational materials, and briefings by Board members and staff with stakeholder groups.

BOARD HOLDS HEARINGS IN THREE CITIES TO GATHER PUBLIC COMMENTS

"Skill credentials that are truly portable can give all workers greater leverage to maximize their economic opportunities," John Boardman, international representative with the Hotel and Restaurant International Union, told members of the National Skill Standards Board at a recent hearing.

Boardman was among nearly 50 witnesses – from business, labor, state vocational and employment-training programs, trade associations, high schools, and colleges – who testified during the Board's initial round of public hearings, held in Kansas City, Mo., Phoenix, and Miami in April. Future hearings are planned to help the Board gather perspectives on skill standards and advice on its work.

Speakers were unanimously supportive of the Board's mission. "Hearing state officials, educators, and business leaders all saying that a national system of voluntary skill standards is desperately needed and vital to our economic future gives us a great lift as we begin broadening public awareness," said NSSB Vice Chairman Bruce

Carswell of GTE.

Len Proper, director of workforce development in Ohio's Bureau of Employment Services, described several innovative workforce-development initiatives begun with the backing of Gov. George Voinovich, a strong supporter of skill standards. One Ohio metal-working firm, for example, has become the first in the nation to adopt industry skill standards and train employees to meet them.

Speakers offered the Board specific advice along these lines: Don't reinvent the wheel; build out from successful models of skill standards that already exist; foster open and ongoing communication between employers and educators; establish a common language of skill standards terms that everyone can understand and use; and develop a long-range plan that ensures the growth and survival of the national voluntary system.

Witnesses agreed that the most important characteristics of national voluntary skill standards should be portability, flexibility, relationship with aca-

demic and basic employability standards, and an eye to the needs of employers and the future.

"It's absolutely critical for the United States to work toward continued improvement of our workplace skills," said Michael Losey, CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management. "Competencies required on the job are growing so fast that the education system can't keep up."

Mark Troppe, manager of workforce programs with the Manufacturing Extension Partnership, a non-profit group that assists small manufacturing firms with development issues, recommended that the standards be presented in a user-friendly style and in one easily accessible place, such as the NSSB clearinghouse. "Many small manufacturers are having a very hard time finding and retaining skilled workers," he said. "Skill shortages are impeding modernization efforts and restraining growth."

For information about the next hearings – seeking comment on characteristics of the workforce development system and how skill standards can contribute – call NSSB Hearing Coordinator, (202) 254-8628. (See the NSSB Calendar on page 1.)

PILOT PROJECTS TO IMPLEMENT STANDARDS IN SEVERAL SECTORS

The National Skill Standards Board has awarded \$2 million in grants to nine industry and research groups for projects that will help spur development and implementation of a voluntary system of skill standards.

The one-year grants, which range from \$100,000 to \$300,000, were awarded to national trade organizations representing the hotel and restaurant, chemical, retail, electronics, construction, and agricultural industries, as well as to four leading research groups in the education and employment-training fields.

Their projects cover a range of issues in the standards-development process, including finding the common ground among similar jobs in different industries; establishing voluntary partnerships among employers, employees, and educators; testing ways to evaluate levels of skill; and devising curricula that prepare people for the skill requirements in various fields.

The Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, for example, expanding on its previous work –

NSSB Funding Recipients

- ▶ American Chemical Society
- ▶ American Electronics Assn.
- ▶ Center for Occupational Research and Development
- ▶ Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education
- ▶ Education Development Center
- ▶ Far West Lab for Educational Research and Development
- ▶ Human Services Research Institute
- ▶ Laborers-AGC Education and Training Fund
- ▶ National Retail Institute

developing standards for eight front-line service positions – will join with other trade groups to explore how the standards can be applied in different fields that also rely heavily on customer service.

The National Future Farmers of America organization will join forces with Education Development Center, a Boston-based research group, to combine curricula in bioscience and agricultural technology into new frameworks that prepare students for modern agricultural workplaces. For more information, write to: Marjorie Haas, NSSB, Suite 9000, 1441 L St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005-3512.

STATE CONSORTIA TO EXPLORE LEARNING MODELS

Three multi-state consortia of school-to-work sites will develop models of specific academic pathways in health, manufacturing, and business under a new "Building Linkages" initiative of the National Skill Standards Board.

Sponsored by the NSSB, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education, and the School-to-Work Opportunities Office of the departments of Education and Labor, the "Building Linkages" projects will explore ways to incorporate state academic and industry recognized skill standards into effective school-to-work systems.

The NSSB has required existing state

school-to-work states to join forces in multi-state groups. The consortia include:

Business/Management. The Oregon Workforce Quality Council will join with business and education partners in Indiana, California, and Washington State.

Health Care. The Utah Department of Education will work in partnership with New Jersey and 16 other states.

Manufacturing. The Indiana Workforce Development Council will work with 13 other states.

The NSSB has asked the consortia to evaluate, in particular:

▶ The portability of academic and industry-recognized skill standards and certifi-

cates across industries and states;

▶ Efforts that reach out to challenge all students, including those in alternative programs, to meet high academic and skill standards;

▶ Business, industry, and labor partnerships in the development of portable skills

▶ Activities that involve parents, students, and teachers in integrating academic and skill standards;

▶ Efforts that redefine roles and responsibilities of educational institutions, community organizations, and training providers to better prepare students for the high-skills economy.

For additional information, contact NSSB Deputy Director Vickie Schray at (202) 254-8628.

The National Skill Standards Board

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